Learning Rounds: What potential for Teacher Inquiry?

A practice insight working paper

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Introduction

Back in 2015 I began work with a primary school in Derby City that was under Special Measures. It was the beginning of a school-university partnership that was to last for over two years. During that time the staff were given the opportunity to 'research' and collect evidence related to problematic areas of their practice. Looking back at this work which was eventually published (Poultney, 2017), I began to wonder just what 'research' had really meant in this primary school context and what these teachers had gained from their experience of collecting evidence, arriving at solutions to their teaching problems, telling other teachers about their findings and writing their chapters for this book. Many of the contributors to the book have since taken up promoted roles, been confident enough to speak at various conferences and make contribution to many professional events since then. Over the time we spent together these teachers have developed a confident 'critical eye' and the ability to ask insightful ask about practice. Day (2017) refers this as the establishment of 'human capital' which is likely to engender trust and a sense of individual and collective well-being which will motivate teachers to engage in activities directly related to raising school standards.

Professional Learning and Rounds

More recently I have worked with teachers using lesson study (Dudley 2014) as a means of evaluating their practice and solving problematic issues (Fox and Poultney, in review, 2018), also action research and teacher inquiry. One of the biggest challenges in these approaches is educating teachers how to collect and analyse evidence from classroom observations. Learning, Teaching, Educational or Instructional Rounds (the terms are interchangeable), which originates from the US is another approach teachers can use to undertake research and inquiry. The difference between Rounds and other approaches is that Rounds are based on a clinical approach to learning where the novice learner (teacher or doctor), through a series of cognitive steps from gathering facts and knowledge about medical/teaching practice, makes transparent their diagnosis, treatments/solutions to other learners as they gain experience in treating patients/educating students (Reece and Klaber, 2017). So in the spirit of Stenhouse (1975) who viewed the classroom as a laboratory, Rounds uses the classroom as clinical practice uses the hospital ward as a place of learning for all.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Teachers are well acquainted with working in teams; often referred to as PLCs. This approach is seen to be collaborative, where everyone benefits from being part of the team in respect of their professional learning. PLCs have been imagined as:

> *A group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, inclusive, learning-orientated, growth-promoted way.* (Watson, 2014: 19).

The success of the outcomes of the PLC in reality depends upon the quality of the critical dialogue teachers are prepared to use. To achieve such criticality teachers need to agree a protocol for how the dialogues should be conducted. Holmlund-Nelson et al. (2010) noted two types of teacher conversation: the 'congenial conversation' (the type of social dialogue one might have with a colleague in the staffroom, akin to narratives of practice) and the 'deep conversation' or 'collegial dialogue' (the critical use of evidence and school data in order to solve problems). This distinction helps to move teachers away from more superficial narratives of practice to dialogue which generates meaning and knowledge. Rounds enable teachers to engage in critical dialogue and support mutual learning. They set the protocols for the type of discussions that generate understanding using evidence from classroom observations, school data and research. This has also been noted by Frederick and Benton, (2018).

There are two distinct models of Rounds. The Del Prete (2013) model is aligned with clinical practice approaches. Here trainee teachers are engaged in a Learning Round hosted by experienced teachers. This model focuses on an issue of practice ('practice-centred inquiry') with trainee learning ('learning centred inquiry') as its central remit. The experienced teacher is required to explain the context for the students' learning and curriculum to the trainees, and will then outline the focus of their inquiry and discuss how they might engage with students during the lesson. The second model is Instructional Rounds (City, 2011), where 'problematic' issues of practice are identified, and where classroom-based observations by, for example, a group of senior staff, provide an evidence-base about a specific school improvement issue. Both approaches encourage trainees and teachers alike to engage in critical reflective dialogue about their own learning and that of their students. The gathering of evidence for a particular pedagogical issue under study helps to remove judgements made about teacher performance.

So how do teachers use Rounds in practice?

The first step is to agree an area, for example, of underperformance or related to a teacher career stage. A PLC is formed comprising those professionals best experienced to conduct

the learning round. This might be teachers, senior, middle leadership, consultants. The group agrees the focus of inquiry and who is to undertake the classroom observations (usually no more than 3-4 observers). There is no rubric for the observations, which should only last 20-30 minutes and these data are shared in a debrief meeting. Observers focus on the specific area of inquiry during their observations and make descriptive notes (descriptive phase). This specific, descriptive evidence is then shared in the debrief meeting with the other observers. Using these accumulated data sets, patterns or themes are identified. These may be related to specific curriculum areas or issues attributable to specific areas of practice/pedagogy. Data which does not 'fit' is noted as exceptional and may be excluded if not directly related to the focus of the inquiry (analytical phase). Observers then put themselves in the position of the learners (the students/pupils) and ask what they have *actually* learnt. This allows observers to be able to predict what the students might have learnt if they had had more information on a specific topic, or instruction on how to source it (predictive phase). Finally the group enters the evaluation phase, where they attempt to decide if the 'problem' is real or imagined and how robust the evidence is at shining a light in a dark corner of practice. Thus there is a close interplay between the students, their teachers and subject content. The observation is closely linked with the debrief session and the protocol of descriptive evidence, data analysis, prediction and evaluation.

If Rounds are so good why are more schools not using them?

The simple answer to this question is that there is very little theoretical analysis or empirical data to support this professional learning tool or approach to teacher inquiry. We perhaps need to think about how teachers learn when they are part of a PLC and how they use their agency. Philpott and Oates (2017: 319) see this as interplay between teachers' past experiences and their ways of thinking and acting in any social context (iterational); their ability to envision possible future alternative ways of thinking and acting and what they are (projective), and the capacity and resources for the current situation (practical-evaluative). Previous understandings and actions can, therefore, determine future ways of thinking, understanding and subsequent acting. This might allow teachers to remain unchanged in their thinking and/or actions or give them possibilities to think and act in new ways. PLCs have been seen as a medium through which teachers can develop their agency, both in terms of their own personal learning and as a way of either responding to, or driving reform.

Rounds should not be isolated events and require leadership, planning and trialling prior to implementation. Teachers might disagree about what constitutes an effective knowledge-base for teaching and leaders may need to take into account that teacher observers may 'pull to the black hole' of existing education practice and the orthodoxy of what counts as good practice (Philpott and Oates, 2015: 34). In their research with four Scottish schools

Philpott and Oates (2015; 2017) note the outcomes of Learning Rounds were fraught with difficulties for the following reasons:

- A focus on teacher actions rather than a connection between teacher actions and student learning;
- The observers did not report evidence with a fine-grained focus on specifics of individual actions;
- Classroom activity was recorded more as a audit and any 'good practice' observed was not described in how it had a positive effect;
- No theory of action was proposed (link between observation data and what is/what is not working in classrooms);
- Premature evaluations on the basis of unclear evidence.

PLCs were then unable to develop their own theory of action or build a sufficient evidence-base to solve the inquiry focus. As Rounds do not require the intervention of an external consultant, and given that teachers do not need access to supporting academic literature, they can seem to offer a financially attractive approach to professional development for classroom practitioners in schools. Philpott and Oates note, however, that a lack of investment in the level of preparation needed to undertake Rounds may have contributed to the participating schools failing to maximise the potential of the strategy as a school improvement/teacher learning initiative/opportunity.

Conclusion

In future partnership collaborations I would, as an academic, strongly consider the use of Learning Rounds as a model for teacher inquiry. This approach has potential for schools to amass an evidence-base about teaching and learning and for teacher professionals to build understanding and knowledge about specific areas of problematic practice. Aligned with clinical methods of learning, Rounds challenges teachers to think about their work in less judgemental ways and to engage in critical discussion based on evidence they have collected, analysed and evaluated. This enables teachers to build theory of practice and improve intellectual and professional capacity. There are, however, some challenges for schools implementing Rounds, linked to leadership, methods of implementation, design of PLCs and development of teacher critical discourses.

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